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On Feet, Necks and the "Greatest Saint": Debating Sufism in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Africa

- Ayaklar, Boyunlar ve "Veli" Üzerine: On dokuzuncu ve Yirminci Yüzyıl Afrika'sında Sufizm Münazarası-

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Öz:

Bu makale tüm zamanların en büyük velisi davası ve böyle bir davanın gerek sufilerin kendi aralarında gerekse püritanist selefilerle yol açtığı tartışmaları konu edinmektedir. Tasavvuf tarihi her ne kadar sahiplerinin manevi statüsüne ilişkin yüce ve muhteşem lakaplarla dolup taşıyorsa da tüm zamanların en büyük velisi iddialarına pek rastlanmamaktadır. Titiz bir filolojik yaklaşımı esas alan bu makale böylesi, biri onüçüncü diğer onsekizinci yüzyılın sonlarıyla ondukuzuncu yüzyılın başlarına ait olan, iki iddia üzerine durmaktadır. Sahipleri de özellikle Afrika kıtasının en dominant iki tarikatı olan Kâdirilik ve Ticânilik'in kurucuları ve son derece nüfuzlu şeyhleri olan Abdülkâdir Geylânî ve Ahmad Ticânî'dir. Konunun birincil kaynaklara dayanan ciddi analizden geçirilmesi, Ticânî'nin kendisini tüm zamanların en büyük velisi olarak lanse ettiği tartışmalı ifadesinin taraftarlarınca yorumlanması ve algılanmasındaki büyük değişimi belirlememizi sağlayacaktır. Bu değişim diğer etkenlerin yanısıra Afrika kıtasındaki püritanist Selefi hareketin hızlı yükselişinin kaçınılmaz bir sonucu gibi görünüyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tasavvuf, Münazara, Ticânilik, Veli, Afrika, Ayaklar ve Boyunlar.

Abstract:

This article revolves around the claim to possess the ultimate rank of the greatest divinely elected saint of all times and the ensuing debates on the one hand among Sufis themselves and on the other with the rival puritanical Salafis. While the history of Sufism is teemed with lofty claims regarding the spiritual status of their owners, not many Sufi masters declared themselves as the supreme saints of all times. This paper, based on a meticulous philological approach to a number of primary sources, elaborates on two statements of such nature, one in thirteenth the other in late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries, made by two highly influential Sufi shaykhs al-Jilānī and al-Tijānī who happened to establish the most dominant brotherhoods in the history of Africa namely the Qādiriyya and the Tijāniyya. This literary analysis of the issue at hand will allow us to identify a ma-

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jor shift in interpretation and perception of a precarious statement in which the founding figure of the Tijāniyya had laid claim to the highest possible rank in Sufi hierarchy. This shift seems to have been the inevitable result of the rise of puritanical Salafī movement, among other factors, in the African continent.

Key Words: Sufism, Debate, Tijāniyya, Greatest Saint, Africa, Feet and Necks.

1. INTRODUCTION

One thing that scholars may not contest seems to be the consensus over the difficulty of defining Sufism. It seems almost impossible to provide a concise definition of Islamic mysticism. Definitions suggested by experts of Sufism resemble, according to Annemarie Schimmel, to the descriptions of people in the famous story in Rumi, "when they were made to touch an elephant, each described it according to the part of body his hands had touched".[1] To understand Sufism one needs to look at the different stages of its evolution classified, by scholars, to different stages based on personal preferences and distinct reading of the history of Sufism.

While one may trace some mystical values all the way to the era of the Prophet and his companions; existence of a specific group referred to as Ascetics/Sufis is restricted to the second/eighth century. Sufism in this period was mainly of ascetic character best exemplified in the collective repetitions of certain formulas of remembering God (*dhikr*) and listening to mystical poetry (*samāʿ*) of ecstatic nature.[2] Asceticism and renunciation of worldly fascinations were widespread among Sufis some of whom nurtured ascetic piety due to their radical aversion to mainstream social life.[3] They advocated instead a rigorous implication of religious commandments and for a full and true 'interiorization of Islam'[4] and its values.

The beginnings of the third/ninth century marked a new era in the history of Sufism, in which the ascetic movement of the past century witnessed fundamental changes. Pious deeds (*ʿamal)* were replaced with spiritual states (*ḥāl*).[5]

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[1] Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press,1975), 3.

[2] Fritz Meier, "The Mystic Path", in *The World of Islam: Faith, People, Culture*, ed. Bernard Lewis (London: Thames and Huston, 1992), 117-18.

[3] Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 1.

[4] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 17.

[5] See for details: Süleyman Uludag, *Islam Düşüncesinin Yapısı: Selef, Kelam, Tasavvuf, Felsefe*, (Istanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 2010), 114-15.

Outward piety left it place to an inward one and the inner self purification became gradually the top priority of the Sufis.[6] This "inward turn manifested itself in new discourses on spiritual states, stages of spiritual development, closeness to God and love".[7] Exoteric knowledge (*ʿilm al-ẓāhir*) was left behind by esoteric knowledge of the interior (*ʿilm al-bāṭin*), one which was acquired through training of the human soul.[8]

From the fifth/eleventh century onwards new dimensions, mostly theosophical in nature, were added to the scope of Sufism. Visionary and occult practices that were waiting previously in the background came to be regarded as self-justifying. Sufi masters enjoyed widespread veneration. Sufi litanies were formularized and fraternities of distinct characters were established leading, eventually, to a competition between Sufi orders[9] for prestige and followers, each claiming the title of the greatest saint for their own master.[10] One instance that sparked tenacious controversies between protagonists of the Tijāniyya brotherhood and its antagonists, both with Sufi orientation and non-Sufi reform-minded püritanist Muslims, was the overbold problematic claim made by its founder and supreme master to occupy the rank of the greatest saint of all times. This paper will offer a detailed investigation of the issue with special focus on different defence strategies developed by protagonists of the brotherhood, however after a brief account of the history of Sufism in Africa.

2. SUFISM IN AFRICA

History of Sufism in Africa is traceable to the formative period of Islamic spirituality. Egypt at this period was already a considerable centre for Sufis with Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 245/859 in Cairo) as one of its most influential representatives.[11] For quite some time, Sufism remained as individual devotion and personal affaire of the elite, however, its introduction to relatively larger

[6] Meier, "The Mystic Path," 118-19.

[7] Karamustafa, *The Formative Period*, 2.

[8] For further information on transition from asceticism to mysticism, see: Christopher Melchert, "The Transition from Asceticism to Mysticism in the Middle of the Ninth Century C.E.," in *Sufism: Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies, Volume I: Origin and Development*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (London: Routledge, 2008), 44-63.

[9] Meier, "The Mystic Path," 119-22.

[10] For a detailed account on the historical phases in the history of Sufism, see: Dilaver Gürer, "Abdülkādir Geylâni ve Kadiriyye'nin Kolları" (PhD diss., Marmara University, 1997), 20-28.

[11] For an account of his life and teachings, see: Michael Ebstein, "Ḏū l-Nūn al-Miṣrī and Early Islamic Mysticism", *Arabica* 61, 2014, 559-612.

groups took place gradually when Sufi confraternities begin to recruit followers through establishing themselves in the continent. Though its part in the early Islamization of Africa is anything but clear, its decisive influence on diffusion and development of Islam from mediaeval era onward and particularly from eighteenth century is well documented. Sufi brotherhoods, particularly the Qādiriyya and the Tijāniyya, and their offshoots dominated the religio-spiritual landscape, making their presence felt at each and every department of the social life, from agricultural[12] to trade and from education to politics.[13] Sufis not only took part in Jihad campaigns for the sake of spreading and consolidating Islamic values among non-Muslim African communities but also stood in the face of European colonialism,[14] though not always. Cases of collaboration and cooperation with colonial authorities, for various reasons, are an undeniable fact.

Currently the two most dominant brotherhoods in Africa are that of the Qādiriyya and the Tijāniyya. The older of the two is the Qādiriyya, named after ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d. 561/1166 in Baghdad)[15] and founded outside the continent, an order loosely structured with diffusive affiliations, known for its strong emphasis upon adherence to the fundamentals of Islam. It is perhaps this *sharīʿa*-centric vision of the order that is responsible for its widespread presence in the Muslim world including Africa. Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), the staunch anti-Sufi of the medieval era, praised the founding figure of the brotherhood and wrote a commentary on his spiritual teachings calling him the *shaykh al-Islām* (litrally: the master of Islam, an honorific title that demonstrates outstanding learning of its holder in Islamic sciences).[16] Family members of al-Jilānī and his immediate disciples[17] played key roles in dissemination of the brotherhood in Egypt, Sudan and North Africa. By mid-fifteenth century local inhabitants of the North were well-familiar with Qādirī Sufism. From there it gradually

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[12] The Senegalese Muridiyya in this regard is a symbol of success. For detail, see: Cheikh Anta Babou, *Fighting the Greater Jihad: Ahmadu Bamba and the Founding of the Muridiyya of Senegal, 1853-1913*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007).

[13] For two successful engagement of the Sufis with politics, see: Rüdiger Seesemann, "Sufism in West Africa," *Religion Compass* 4/10 (2010): 606-614.

[14] For an example of the Sufis fighting colonialism, see: Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of the Cyrenaica*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 104-91.

[15] For a detailed account of his life and teachings, see: ʿAlī Muḥammad al-Ṣalābī, *al-ʿĀlim al-kabīr wa-l-murrabī al-shahīr al-Shaykh ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī*, (Cairo: Muʾassat Iqraʾ, 2007); Jamil M. Abun-Nasr, *Muslim Communities of Grace: The Sufis Brotherhoods in Islamic Religious Life*, (London: Hurst & Co, 2007), 86-96.

[16] Yūsuf Zaydān, *al-Ṭarīq al-ṣūfī wa-furūʿ al-qādiriyya bi-Miṣr*, (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1411/1991), 12-13 and 176-77.

[17] For details, see: Gürer, "Abdülkādir," 289.

spread towards the Saharan and sub-Saharan region, with Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Maghīlī's (d. c. 1505) sojourns to important centres of power educating ruling dynasties on principles of genuine Islamic rule.[18] While Kuntas of sixteen-ninteenth centuries, with Sīdī al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī (d. 1811) as the most renowned representative of the tribe,[19] played key role in spread of the order and in the process of Islamization of West Africa; Fulanis under the religio-political leadership ofʿUthmān b. Fūdī (d. 1817), better known as Usman dan Fodio, established the Sokoto caliphate in nineteenth century. Parallel to these events in the West, several branches of the Qādiriyya in the eastern coast, from Somalia to Malavi, played their parts in Islamization of the region and in opening up Sufism in particular to the local black inhabitants.[20] In twentieth century, the brotherhood reformed itself with the efforts of the Nigerian Muḥammad al-Nāṣir al-Kabārī known also as Nasiru Kabara (d. 1996), and emerged as a mass movement in Nigeria.[21] Another revival of the brotherhood took place around the turn of the twenty first century in Morocco, under the survailence and support of the state,[22] with its Boutchichiyya fraction, established by Abu Madyan b. al-Munawwar (d. 1955 known also as Maydan b. La Mnaour) near the city of Berkane in early twentieth century, considered nowadays as the most popular Sufi brotherhood of the country.[23]

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[18] Some researchers claim that the order's arival to West Africa dates back to twelfth and thirteenth century. See: Ramzi Ben Amara, "The Izāla Movement in Nigeria: Its Split, Relationship to Sufis and Perception of Sharīʿa Re-implementation" (PhD diss., University of Bayreuth, 2011), 77.

[19] On his outstanding career as both spriritio-religious and politcal leader, see: Abd al-Aziz Abdallah Batran, "Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kunti and the Recrudescence of Islam in the Western Sahara and the Middle Niger c. 1750-1811" (PhD diss., Univeristy of Birmingham, 1971). For an account of the intellectual output of Kuntas, see: John O. Hunwick, ed., Arabic *Literature of Africa: The Writings of Western Sudanic Africa*, vol. IV, (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 67-148.

[20] For details, see: Kunt S. Viktor, "Sufi Brotherhoods in Africa," in *The History of Islam in Africa*, ed. Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), 447-49.

[21] For an account of the brotherhoods developement under Nasiru Kabara, see: Abdul Raufu Mustapha & Mukhtar U. Bunza, "Contemporary Islamic sects & groups in northern Nigeria," in *Sects & Social Disorder*, ed. Abdul Raufu Mustapha (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2014), 58-63; Roman Loimeier, *Islamic Reform and Political Change in Northern Nigeria*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 52-70.

[22] Mark Sedgwick "Sufis as 'Good Muslims': Sufism in the Battle against Jihadi Salafism," in *Sufis and Salafis in Contemporary Age*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 106-08.

[23] Ricardo René Larémont, "Sufism in Salafism in the Maghreb: Political Implicaitons," in *Social Currents in North Africa*, ed. Osama Abi-Mershed, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2108), 40.

The Tijāniyya, in contrast to the Qādiriyya, is native to the continent. Established by Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Tijānī (d. 1230/1815 in Fez) [24] in the Algerian town of ʿAyn Māḍī in late eighteenth century, a period often identified by scholars with the stagnation of Islam.[25] The brotherhood, though known for promoting controversial and at times exclusivist doctrines, made huge gains in terms of followers in North Africa during the lifetime of its founder, who appointed authoritative deputies (*muqaddam*) to conduct missionary work. In nineteenth century, the brotherhood achieved to establish itself through the activities of the influential scholarly tribe Idwa ʿAl from Shinqit Mauritania not only in Western Sahara but also it reached Nilotic Sudan.[26] With the rise of ʿUmar b. Saʿīd al-Fūtī (d. 1864), widely known as al-Hājj ʿUmar and considered as the towering Tijānī authority of the century in West Africa, Tijānīs formed a huge though a short-lived state only to perish towards the end of the century.[27] Over the course of the twentieth century, the brotherhood emerged as the dominant Sufi order of the continent. Though it can be found today over all five continents, West Africa, in the aftermath of Ibrāhīm Niyās's (d. 1975) rise to prominence with the community of the 'divine flood', stands out as the stronghold of the brotherhood.[28]

3. CLAIMS OF SUPREMACY: THE GREATEST SAINT

Sufis, right from the get-go, used to call their masters with lofty titles and epithets to highlight their meritorious spiritual status. Claims of supremacy

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[24] For a critical account of his life, see: Jamil M. Abun-Nasr, *The Tijaniyya: A Sufi Order in the Modern World*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1965). For a more sympathetic account, see: Zachary V. Wright, *On the Path of the Prophet: Shaykh Ahmad Tijani and the Tariqa Muhammadiyya*, Atlanta: African American Islamic Institute, 2005.

[25] Rüdiger Seesemann, "A New Dawn for Sufism? Spiritual Training in the Mirror of Nineteenth-Century Tijānī Literature," in *Sufism, Literary Production and Printing in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Rachida Chih, Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen and Rüdiger Seesemann (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2014), 281.

[26] Viktor, "Sufi Brotherhoods," 451. Nilotic Sudan has witnessed the arrival of Tijāniyya from other channels such as Morocco and Nigeria as well. For details, see: Rüdiger Seesemann, "The History of the Tijâniyya and the Issue of *tarbiya* in Darfur (Sudan)," in *La Tijâniyya. Une confrérie musulmane à la conquête de l'Afrique*, ed. David Robinson & Jean Louis Triaud (Paris: Karthala, 2000), 393-437.

[27] For details, see: Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ, *ʿUmar al-Fūtī: sulṭān al-dawla al-Tijāniyya bi-gharb Ifrīqyā shay min jihādihi wa-tārikh ḥayātihi*, (Cairo: al-Zāwiya al-Tijāniyya, 1383 AH); David Robinson, *The Holy War of Umar Tal*, **(**Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

[28] For further details, see: Rüdiger Seeseman, *The Divine Flood: Ibrāhīm Niasse and the Roots of a Twentieth-Century Sufi Revival*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

among Sufi masters gained momentum parallel to the appearance of Sufi orders in twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The revered master of the Qādiriyya, al-Jīlānī, is reported to have consolidated his spiritual status, during a preaching session in Baghdad a year prior to his death in 1165, through placing his foot on the necks of all divinely elected saints, an expression that signifies in Arabic language supremacy and authority. While the session was attended, among others, by more than fifty leading scholars of Baghdad, he said: " قدمي هذه علي رقبة كل ولي لله: This foot of mine is upon the neck of each and every friend of God". This declaration, based on which he was given the epithets of the king of divine saints (*sulṭān al-awlīyāʾ*) and the greatest succor (*al-ghawth al-aʿẓam*), is reported by ʿAlī al-Shaṭnawfī (d. 1314) , a Qādirī known for entertaining extreme reverence for al-Jīlānī. In his *Bahjat al-asrār*, a hagiographical account of the life of the founding figure of the brotherhood, al-Shaṭnawfī makes the following statement:

> "No divinely elected saint left on the face of earth at that time but bent his neck [before him] out of humbleness to Allah while recognizing al-Jīlānī's [meritorious] spiritual status. No assembly among the assemblies of the righteous Jinn left, at that time, in which this passed unmentioned. He was visited by delegations of the righteous among Jinn from all over the globe greeting him and seeking divine mercy through his hands while lining up infront of his door."[29]

Although, the majority if not all, followers of the Qādiriyya hold the declaration of their master as his undisputed supremacy over other saints, some well-known authorities of various fields of Islamic sciences dismiss the claim of "foot upon the neck" as invention and fabrication of certain Qādirīs including al-Shaṭnawfī himself.[30] Whatever the case maybe, poetry of esctatic nautre attributed to al-Jīlānī provides definate claims to superiority over other saints. In an estatic poem considered by researchers as a commentary of the 'foot unpon the neck' declaraion,[31] he claims: "أفلت شموس الاولين وشمسنا علي فلك العلي لاتغرب: Suns of the earlier saints perished while our sun remains on the sky of highness and

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[29] This translation belongs to my pin. The original statement goes as: " ولم يبق ولي لله في الارض في ذلك الوقت الا حني عنقة تواضعا لله واعترافا بمكانته، ولم يبق ناد من أندية صالحي الجن في ذلك الوقت، الا وفيه ذكرذلك وقصدته وفود صالحي الجن من جميع الأفاق مسلمين عليه تائبين علي يديه، وازدحموا علي بابه" see: ʿAlī b. Yūsuf al-Shaṭnawfī, *Bahjat al-asrār wa-maʿdan al-anwār*, ed. Jamāl al-Dīn Fāliḥ al-Kaylānī, (Fez: al-Munaẓẓama al-Maghribiyya, 2013), 33.

[30] For further details, see: ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿAbd al-Muḥsin al-Anṣārī, *Ṭabaqāt khirqa al-ṣūfiyya*, (Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Bahiyya, 1886), 51-53; Sirāj al-Dīn b. Abdallāh al-Makhzūmī, *Siḥāḥ al-akhbār fī nasab sādda al-Fāṭimiyya al-akhyār*, ed. ʿĀrif Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Ghanī, (Damascus: Dār al-ʿArab, 2014), 348-49.

[31] See for instance: Gürer, "Abdülkādir," 91.

will never disappear".[32] In others pieces of such kind he perceives himself as the honorable master of all divine saints whose obedience is made incumbent upon all poles (*aqṭāb*).[33]

In the centuries following the era of al-Jīlānī, no Sufi master, to the best of my knowledge, dared to make a similar claim. Hagiographies, praising his scholarly capabilities and spiritual status, were written by his followers in many major languages of Islamic thought such as Arabic, Turkish and Persian.[34] However, with the establishment of the Tijāniyya, its founding figure al-Tijānī made an unprecedented unique declaration that, in the eyes of his followers, highlighted his absolute superiority over other saints. He is said to have summoned Muḥammad al-Ghalī (d. 1829), the closest to him among his immediate disciples, to his presence one day. Upon the latter's arrival, al-Tijānī pointed out to his feet claiming they were upon the necks of all divinely elected saint. Being familiar with al-Jīlānī's declaration, al-Ghalī wondered whether his master was in a state of sobriety and subsistence (*ṣaḥw* and *baqāʾ*) or intoxication and annihilation (*sakr* and *fanāʾ*). The supreme master of the Tijāniyya, however, informed him that he was in full control of his senses and knew what he has just uttered. Thereupon al-Ghalī reminded him of the declaration made by al-Jīlānī, whom for the same reason was accepted by many as the occupant of the highest rank in the spiritual hierarchy of saints. Al-Tijānī responded that the declaration of his Qādirī counterpart was of a restricted nature, confined to the saints of his era alone. Whereas his own statement was applicable to all saints from the time of the first prophet Adam till the day of Judgement. He said: " صدق رضي الله عنه يعني اهل عصره وأما أنا فأقول قدماي هاتان علي رقبة كل ولي لله تعالي من لدن ادم الي النفخ في الصور: He said the truth, may Allah be pleased with him. He meant the people of his era, whereas I say that my these two feet are upon the neck of each and every divinely electtd saint from the time of Adam until the blowing of the trumpet." He further added that no divine saint would ever make such a claim after him. These words must have been too disturbing for al-Ghali's mystical test. He wondered whether this was putting a restriction on divine mercy. After all, sainthood was a divine matter and He could have bestowed any saint after al-Tijānī with a higher level of divine knwoledge and mystical secrets. Although Allah was capable of more then this, he was, claimed al-Tijānī, not going to do

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[32] Al-Shaṭnawfī, *Bahjat al-asrār*, 349.

[33] The supreme master of the Qādiriyya makes a comparison between his spiritual status and that of others, claiming that other drank from his remnents. For further details, see: Al-Shaṭnawfī, *Bahjat al-asrār*, 346 and 349.

[34] For further information on the hagiographies, see: Gürer, "Abdülkādir," 124-34.

so. He had no such an intention. The supreme master of the brotherhood further compared his sainthood with the prophethood of Muhammad. As no prophet was going to appear after the Prophet of Islam, no divinely elected saint was going to lay claim to the highest rank of sainthood after al-Tijānī.[35]

4. THE TİJĀNİYYA UNDER FIRE

Similar to the declaration of his feet upon the necks of the saints, al-Tijānī made countless statements in affirmation of his status as the supreme saint of all times. He declared himself, among others, as the pole of the poles (*quṭb al-aqṭāb*) and the seal of Muhammadan sainthood (*al-khatam al-walāya al-muḥammadiyya*), meaning he was the predominant power in the universe from which other poles drew their spiritual authority. All creatures including divinely elected saints were receiving divine emanations and spiritual sustenance through him without realizing that al-Tijānī was responsible for it. Tijāniyya, based on his own account, abrogated all other Sufi denominations as the religion of Islam had abrogated all other religions, whereas no Sufi denomination would ever be able to abrogate it. He assured his followers of Paradise without any subjugation to any sort of reckoning or punishment in Hereafter and regardless of the quality of their deeds. In the same way, he who happened to see the Tijānī master on Monday and Friday, regardless of his religious background, was going to end up in Paradise. This exaggerated sense of self-importance led him to ban his followers from paying visits of any kind to any saint, be he dead or alive. Furthermore, he warned them of divine wrath if they were to relinquish their ties with the brotherhood. None of these were his personal promises, the supreme master of the Tijāniyya claimed them on the authority of the Prophet with whom he had countless daylight communication in flesh and blood.[36]

As the Tijāniyya brotherhood underwent rapid dissemination in nineteenth century Africa, such declarations of ascendancy caused a stir among non-Tijānī Muslims, particularly among the followers of the rival Qādiriyya that lost considerable ground to the Tijāniyya on both religio-doctrinal and

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[35] This conversation is related by al-Hājj ʿUmar al-Fūtī on the authority of Muhammad al-Ghālī himself. For further details, see: ʿUmar b. Saʿīd al-Fūtī, *Rimāḥ ḥizb al-Raḥīm ʿalā nuḥūr ḥizb al-rajīm*, vol. 2, (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1383/1963), 14-15; Abun-Nasr, *The Tijaniyya*, 38-39.

[36] For a complete account of the virtues and merits of the Tijānī master and his brotherhood see: Jamil M. Abun Nasr, "Tijani Doctrines and Way of Life", in *Sufism: Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies, Volume I: Origin and Development*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (London: Routledge, 2008), 260-87.

political levels. Having political grievances against the rapid rise of the Tijānī state established by al-Hājj ʿUmar in mid-century, Aḥmad al-Bakkāʾī (d. 1965), a descendant of al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī and the spiritio-political master of the Qādiriyya-Bakkāʾiyya in Timbuktu, wrote several letters of reprimand addressed to Alfā ʿUmar, a commander of al-Hājj ʿUmar. In one of the letters, the commander was chastised for his alleged confusion concerning the hierarchical structure of authority in Islam, with regard to Allah, the Prophet and the saints. He is advised to approach the Prophet in the light of the divine commands, to adhere firmly to his Sunna, and to accept from his master al-Tijānī only that which conforms with the Sunna. Eventually, he declared Tijānīs as heretics. The declaration of feet upon the neck of all saints on the part of al-Tijānī must have disturbed al-Bakkāʾī big time. In a subsequent altercation with the influential Moroccan scholar Muḥammad al-Kansūsī (d. 1877), he claimed that it was instead a fabrication of the Tijānīs. From his perspective, neither the master claimed it nor had he possessed all necessary attributes of a Sufi master to found his own spiritual denomination.[37] He invites Tijānīs to join the Qādiriyya instead, a Sufi denomination unmatched as its founder and patron saınt al-Jīlānī himself. Another Qādirī master agitated by supremacist attitude of the Tijānīs was Nasiru Kabara of Northern Nigeria. As the spread of the Fayda Movement of Ibrāhīm Niyās, who had declared himself as ghawth (the supreme saint of the time), in the country started to threaten the social and economical base of the Qādiriyya, Kabara, as the most potent shaykh of the order at the time, undertook a counter campaign of reform confronting Fayda on both doctrinal and legal levels. In a series of polemical writings around the mid-century, he declared himself as ghawth prohibiting his followers from joining other Sufi denominations including the Tijāniyya. Furthermore, he put a great deal of emphasis on the purported spiritual ascendancy of al-Jīlānī over other saints till the day of judgment.[38]

With the turn of the twentieth century Tijānīs had to face, in addition to Qādirīs with whom they would eventually join ranks, a new rival movement namely the puritanical Salafīs.[39] While scholars are united on the ascendancy of Sufi orders in nineteenth and early twentieth century, some argued that Sufism

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[37] Abun-Nasr, *The Tijaniyya*, 168-70. For further information on doctrinal altercations of Tijānīs with non-Tijānī Muslims in the nineteenth century, see: Mohammad Ajmal Hanif, "Debating Sufism: The Tijāniyya and its Opponents" (PhD diss., Bayreuth University, 2018), 42-47.

[38] For further details and the Tijānī responses, see: Hanif, "Debating Sufism," 61-64.

[39] I use the term Salafīs/Salafiyya in its widest meaning namely the reformists mindeset that orient itself towards the first three generations of Muslims called as the pious predecessors (*al-Salaf al-Ṣāliḥ*) in understanding and interpreting the religion of Islam.

was inevitably in decline from mid-twentieth century onwards. Anthropologists such as the American Cliffort Geertz and the British-Czech Ernest Gellner pioneered the inevitable decline argument in their works compiled around the same time period. The rise of "scripturalism" promoted by reform-minded Muslims among other socio-political factors and the purported shortcoming of Sufism, labelled as the "folks religiosity", in response to these factors.[40] However, resurgence of Sufism in the last quarter of the century in different settings of the Muslim world proved otherwise. Sufism showcased its resilience and adaptability.[41] Nevertheless, it had to revision some of its tenets in face of the vehement anti-Sufi campaigns of puritanical Salafiyya calling for scripture based pristine Islam. One of the famous representatives of this movement was the Moroccan Muḥammad Taqī al-Dīn al-Hilālī (d. 1987).[42] Once a zealous defender of the Tijānī doctrines himself, he denounced Sufism, after an eye-opening debate with Muḥammad b. al-ʿArabī al-ʿAlawī (d. 1964), in early 1920s in Fez, concerning the issue of the daylight encounters with the Prophet.[43] His life account, teemed with journeys to Middle East, the Indian sub-continent and Europe, is one of the struggle for spreading the so called true brand of Islam and fighting colonialism in Africa. After conversion to puritanical Salafiyya, many verbal altercations occurred between him and protagonists of the Tijāniyya, among them his mentor Aḥmad Sukayrij. This would let Tijānīs to call him as their biggest enemy (*akbar ʿadūw li-l-tijānīyīn*).[44] In early 1970s while occupying a teaching post at the Islamic University of Madinah, he produced his only written treatise in refutation of the Tijānī doctrines *al-Hadiyya al-hādiya ilā l-ṭāʾifa al-Tijāniyya*. The treatise provided a detailed account of the purported ascendancy of the Tijānīs and the lofty virtues they attached to their brotherhood. The declaration of purported ascendancy over other saints is considered a clear sign of arrogance and cockiness. The supreme master of the Tijāniyya is,

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[40] For details see: Cliffort Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Movements in Morocco and Indonesia*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971); Ernest Gellner, *Muslim Society*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[41] The cyclical revival of Chishtiyya tradition in South Asia from its appearance in thirteenth century up until today is an outstanding example debunking the inevitable decline argument. For details, see: Carl W. Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love: Chishti Sufism in South Asia and Beyond*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

[42] For a complete account of his life and works, see: Henri Lauzière, "The Evolution of the Salafiyya in the Twentieth Century Through the Life and Thought of Taqi al-Din al-Hilali" (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2008).

[43] For further details of the debate, see: Hanif, "Debating Sufism," 209-12.

[44] ʿUmar Muḥammad Masʿūd, *al-Tijāniyya wa-khuṣūmuhum wa-l-qawl al-ḥaqq*, (n.p. [Khartoum], n.d), 5.

nevertheless, spared from criticism. It is not logical, he stated, that any such claim would be made by a Sufi saint, let alone by one of the calibre of al-Tijānī. Not to mention that the respective declaration is a clear deviation from the traditional trajectory of Sufism in which modesty and humbleness play decisive role. It was his followers, as far as al-Hilālī was concerned, who crossed the line and went so far to attribute such statements to him. The following is an excerpt:

> Isn't it contempt, and an insult? How can it be due to a Sufi [a reference to al-Tijānī] who has fought his lower soul, succeeding to discipline it until it found its way to God, or so he thinks, and has been purified from all lameness, stains and dirt, to step upon the people's necks with his feet? We were used to Sufis, for example the Shādhilīs, who would define themselves as the soil beneath the feet of the peoples of Allah. Then came the Tijānīs, with a totally opposite claim. Was it not enough for them to assert that their master was the seal of Muhammadan sainthood, the leader of the cognizant and their sustainer, that they had to lay all the righteous divine saints in front of him, for him to step on their necks with his feet? By God, whom there is no deity apart from, how far the arrogance of his followers took them.[45]

The declaration was, from al-Hilālī's perspective, not only arrogant in nature but contradicted Qurʾānic injunctions displaying absolutely no compatibility with the tradition of pious forefathers. The holy Qurʾān accentuated the fact that Paradise will be granted only to those who are humble, and do not desire exaltedness over others.[46] Ibn Mulaykah (d. 735), a highly esteemed *tābiʿī* (follower of the companions), was said to have met thirty of the Prophet's companions all of whom feared hypocrisy (*nifāq*), while Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. ٧٢٨) the revered master of Basra was reported to have said that only a believer fears hypocrisy, and only a hypocrite would not fear it. These were clear examples, for the Moroccan Salafī, of the fact that pious predecessors were humble people. They used to question their own souls, carrying an immense fear of hypocrisy; whereas Tijānīs are firmly convinced that they are the beloved friends of God, who will be granted Paradise without undergoing any reckoning or punishment. Even the less humble and less decent among the Muslims, the Moroccan stated, would not agree to put their feet upon the feet of their fellow Muslims, let alone their necks.[47]

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[45] Muḥammad Taqī al-Dīn al-Hilālī, *al-Hadiyya al-hādiya ilā al-ṭāʾifa al-Tijāniyya*, (n.p. [Medina]: no publisher [Islamic University of Madinah Press], 1393/1973), 57.

[46] Qasas, 28/83.

[47] Al-Hilālī, *al-Hadiyya al-hādiya*, 57.

5. TIJĀNĪ STRATEGIES IN DEFENCE OF THE DECLARATION

Proponents of the Tijāniyya developed different strategies in defence of the declaration depending upon the doctrinal background of the opponents and the historical context. In their altercations with fellow Sufis they were more inclined towards a literalist reading of the problematic terms mentioned in the declaration. This, of course, coincided with the time span of nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century in which Tijāniyya made great advances in previously Qādirī dominated territories. In a masterly organised response to al-Bakkāʾī under the title *al-Jawāb al-muskit* the Moroccan Tijānī al-Kansūsī provided a comparison between the patron saints of both Qādiriyya and Tijāniyya. Al-Jīlānī, according to him, possed three valuable personal charateristics namely his vigorous devotion to the issue of worshiping God, his abundance of knowledge and being an honorable descendent of the Prophet Muḥammad. Although he was granted a divine permission to disclose his superiority over other mystics, nontheless it was restricted to the saints of his era alone. Furthermor, he was not the only Sufi master with these traits. Muḥammad b. Sulaymān al-Jazūlī (d. 1465), a fifteenth century Moroccan Sufi leader of the Jazūla tribe, was another mystic personality with the limited privilege for the same reason. Whereas al-Tijānī, was blessed with an additional forth trait that is living at the ends of time (*ākhir al-zamān*), not to mention his title of being the seal of Muhammadan sainthood. It was on the basis of these additional traits that he declared himself as the supreme saint of all times.[48] The opponent is, therefore, subtly chastised for heeding the false rumors concerning the Tijāniyya and its patron saint.[49]

However, when polemical confrontations with puritanical Salafīs in twentieth century made the brotherhood lose ground some, if not all, Tijānīs started to develop new strategies based on metaphorical and semi-metaphorical readings of the respective term. Aḥmad Sukayrij, the great Moroccan polemicist of the first half of twentieth century, for instance argued in one of his polemical writings *al-Imān al-ṣaḥīḥ*, written in refutations of the Salafī ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd b. Bādīs (d. 1940), that the term *qadamāya* (my two feet), in the declaration was either a reference to *sharīʿa* and *ḥaqīqa* (the religion of Islam and the Sufi spirituality) or to *khatmiyya* and *katmiyya*, (two exclusive spiritual distinctions claimed by al-Tijānī meaning he was the hidden and the most meritorious saint of all

[48] Muḥammad al-Kansūsī, *al-Jawāb al-muskit fī l-radd ʿalā man takallama fī ṭarīq al-Imām al-Tijānī bi-la tashabbut*, ed. Muḥammad al-Kabīr al-Tijānī, (n.p, [Ouargla] n.d,) 46-47.

[49] Al-Kansūsī, *al-Jawāb al-muskit*, 15, 51.

times), rather than his own physical feet.[50] This was not the only explanation of the Moroccan, in another polemical treatise *al-Ṣirāṭ al-musṭaqīm*, in reply to the Egyptian Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Makhlūf (d. 1936), he asserted that the declaration either belonged to the Prophet himself spoken through the supreme master of the brotherhood. Or the term *qadamāya* was a reference to *ḥaḍra muḥammadiyya* and *ḥaḍra aḥmadiyya*, two merits that are preserved for the founding figure of the Tijāniyya in the Hereafter. In the latter case, the statement should be perceived as an ecstatic utterance pronounced in a moment of joy when al-Tijānī was shown divine blessings reserved exclusively for him.[51]

This line of argumentation was taken by Maḥmūd b. Bensālim (b. 1955), a fifth-generation grandson of al-Tijānī in Morocco, to a whole new level. The reference in the declaration, according to him, was made to *sharīʿa* and *ṭarīqa* rather than to the personal ascendency of the founding figure of the Tijāniyya over other saints**.** *Sharīʿa* and *ṭarīqa*, argued he, were resembled to feet for a particular purpose. Feet are essential assets of mobility and motion. Just as arrival at the desired destination is not possible without dependence on feet reaching divine reality and achieving spiritual illumination is not possible without following the guidelines of *sharīʿa* and *ḥaqīqa*. He went so far that he even denied the word of *hātān* (these two, a reference to the physical feet) which appeared in the declaration immediately after *qadamāya*. If al-Tijānī knew, according to him, that his statement would be misread after his death, he would have certainly formulated it in a much more clear and comprehensible manner.[52] Bensālim blamed fellow Tijānīs for failing to keep such declarations on the part of the supreme master undisclosed. They were meant to be for the elites (*khāssa*) while Tijānīs committed the mistake of opening them up to ordinary people.[53]

It should be mentioned that not all leading Tijānī authorities adopted such strategies. Some were not ready for any sort of compromise related to the issue. The Egyptian Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ (d. 1978), known for his scholarly credentials among the followers of the brotherhood, was one of them. In line with the conventional strategy of the brotherhood, the term, for him, was a ref-

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[50] He asserts that founding figure of the brotherhood did not say *rijlāya* which is a reference to physical feet but rather preferred to say *qadamāya* a reference to either *shariʿa* and *ḥaqīqa* or to *khatmiyya* and *katmiyya*. See deitals in Aḥmad Sukayrij, *al-Imān al-ṣaḥīḥ fī l-radd ʿalā muʾallif al-jawāb al-ṣarīḥ*, (Tunis: Maṭbaʿa al-Nahḍa, 1358 AH), 94.

[51] Aḥmad Sukayrij, *al-Ṣirāṭ al-musṭaqīm fī l-radd ʿalā muʾallif al-Manhaj al-qawīm*, (Tunis: Maṭbaʿa al-Nahḍa, 1358 AH), 668.

[52] Bensālim, *al-Tijānīyya*, 140.

[53] See details in Bensālim, *al-Tijānīyya*, 140-44.

erence to the status of al-Tijānī as the supreme saint of all times and his spiritual path as the respectable Sufi denomination for all saints.[54] This pattern was followed by Aḥmad b. al-Hādī (d. 2009) of Mauritania. Responding to al-Hilālī, instead of engaging with the core of the criticism, he scolded the Moroccan Salafī for turning his back on the Tijāniyya for which he would certainly face divine wrath on the day of Judgment.[55]

6. CONCLUSION

Striving for supremacy among Sufi masters accelarated with the establishment of Sufi denominations. Al-Jīlānī, the founding figure of the Qādiriyya, was arguably the first Sufi shaykh to declare himself as the supreme saint of all times. This epithet was thought to be his preserve up untill the appearance of the Tijāniyya whoes patron saint al-Tijānī laid claim to the same title expressing his superiority with a set of words unprecedented in the history of Islamic mysticism, evoking bitter criticism not only from the rival Qādirīs but also from proponents of puritanical Salafīs. Tijānīs developed different strategies in which historical context and the overall attitude of the opponents towards Sufism played a decisive role. They stuck with the literalist reading of "my these two feet are upon the neck of each and every divinely elected saint" declaration while dealing with fellow Sufis. However, against the rise of puritanical Salafiyya they took a less problematic stance on the issue. The respective declaration was revisited and a new interpretation was suggested.

Its true that encounter, among other factors, with puritanical Salafīs who laid great emphsis on he scripture based understanding of the religion did not bring about the demise of Sufism and Sufi orders, as some scholars had claimed so. As a matter of fact different parts of the Muslim world including Africa witnessed an unexpected revival of Sufism. Nevertheless we should acknowledge that the rise of puritanical Salafiyya, among other social and political factors, pushed Sufis to pursue a revision and reevaluation of some if not all of their tenets bringing about "a shift towards more learned varities of Sufism" as one

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[54] Muḥammad al-Ḥāfiẓ, *'Ulamāʾ tazkiyat al-nafs min aʿlam al-nās bi-l-kitāb wa-l-sunna*, (n.p. [Cairo], n.d.), 15.

[55] Aḥmad b. al-Hādī, *Shams al-dalīlli-iṭfāʾ al-qandīl wa-muḥiqq mā li-l-Dakhīl wa-l-Hilālī min turrāhāt wa-abāṭīl*, (Rabat: Maṭbaʿat al-Karāma, 1427/2006), 242

scholar has put it.[56] It was in this context that some literate Tijānīs took a new stance on the alledged superiority of their supreme master over other saints. This literary analysis of the primary sources proved that some, if not all, learned men of the Tijāniyya tackled some seemingly problematic aspects of Islamic mysticism with emphasis on the utility of a *sharīʿa*-centric approach. Maḥmūd b. Bensālim, a contemporary member of the family of al-Tijānī in Morocco, clearly admitted that the respective statement was a praise of the religion of Islam and had nothing to do with the spiritual status of the founding figure of the Tijāniyya. Furthermore, he rebuked fellow Tijānīs for reiterating the declaration without sufficient spiritual knowledge. The new interpretation suggested makes a fine case for the compelling pressure of scripturalism as well as for the resilience and adoptability of Sufism to modren settings.

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[56] See: Martin Van Bruinessen, "Sufism, 'Polular' İslam, and the Encounter with Modernity", in *Islam and Modernity: Key Issues and Debates*, ed. Muhammad Khalid Masud, Armando Salvatore, and Martin van Bruinessen (Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 149.

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